

Dyckman House, Broadway & 204th St.,
New York City.
New York Co

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

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Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

THE DYCKMAN HOUSE
Northwest Corner of Broadway and 204th Street
New York City

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Location, Date, and History

This is the only eighteenth century farmhouse still existing on Manhattan Island, and an excellent specimen of its kind. Originally on the old road to Kingsbridge, overlooking pastures, orchards and gardens, it now stands, since the streets were regulated throughout the northern part of Manhattan Island, at the northwest corner of Broadway and 204th Street.

Broadway was lowered about 15 feet in front of it, leaving the house still on its commanding high ground from which one may look eastward toward the Harlem River and beyond to New York University, which stands on Fordham Heights. To the south, in Revolutionary times, rose the heights of Fort George and Fort Washington, while on the west was the ridge of Inwood, then called "Mount Washington," which commands a view of the Hudson and the Palisades.

A glimpse of the Dyckman family history serves to give the place the living character of "a local habitation and a name." William Dyckman, who built it, was a grandson of Jan Dyckman, who came to New Amsterdam from Bentheim, Westphalia, toward the close of the Dutch occupation of New York (1660) and settled in Harlem. He and Jan Nagel were granted part of the present Dyckman tract about 1677. William, third in line of descent, inherited his estate from his father in 1773. His first home, which he built at the time of his marriage, stood near the Harlem River at the present 210th Street, the home of his father and grandfather being southwest of it between 208th and 209th Streets. When the Revolution came, William's sympathies were with the Americans, but his home was not in a safe place



The Dyckman House

for his family; so he abandoned that house to its fate and went to live with his cousins near Peekskill. He was beyond military age, but four of his sons were soldiers, and their individual exploits contributed to the notable services performed by the patriots of Westchester County during the War. When William returned to Kingsbridge in 1783, he found his former home burned to the ground and his farm ruined. He proceeded at once to build the present house on its new site. He brought stone from the ruins of the old house, and timbers from old buildings still standing in that neighborhood. In this new home he lived until he died in 1787. The house and farm passed to his son Jacobus who lived there until his death in 1837. For a fuller account of this interesting family's history, see The 22d Ann. Report of the Am. Scenic & Historic Preservation Soc. (1917), 468-474.

In course of time, when building of modern apartment houses became a near possibility in that locality, plans were seriously considered to move the old house or destroy it; but two descendants of William Dyckman expressed a desire to buy it of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Judge, who then were owners, to have it restored, and to present it to the City. These two generous patronesses of the old and ^{the} historic were Mrs. Bashford Dean (formerly Mary Alice Dyckman) and Mrs. Alexander McMillan Welch (formerly Fanny Frederica Dyckman). The offer was formally accepted by the City on Nov. 12, 1915, on the recommendation of the Park Commissioner, the Hon. Cabot Ward. (Ibid., p. 463.)

Architectural Description

Then came the work of restoration. The original design of the old house, which suggests features of the earlier period around 1750, was quite well understood from a drawing of it made in 1835. The house had



The Dyckman House

been little changed since it was built. Mr. Alexander McMillan Welch, an architect, who with Mr. Bashford Dean became an honorary curator of the place, was able to determine what alterations were necessary to restore it to its condition prior to 1800.

A small north wing, added about 1830, was removed. The back porch, destroyed about 1880, was reconstructed, its foundation stones being still in position. Even the smoke-house was replaced after a picture of the original one, and the well-curb was reproduced. Rotted beams were mended or replaced by similar hand-hewn timbers of the same age. The house was newly shingled, and all the original exterior woodwork was repainted.

Inside, the only serious changes were in the woodwork of the hall and dining-room, which had been "modernized" about 1850. To accomplish this, the older woodwork was copied as found either under the newer pieces or in other parts of the house. Missing hinges, locks, latches, hand-made nails, etc., were supplied from other houses of similar date. The double or "Dutch" doors were original except in the summer kitchen. The original colors of walls and woodwork were discovered by removing later layers of paint and duplicating the first layer found.

A retaining wall of stone resembling that of the house was built along the sidewalk on the two streets at the foot of the high ground on which the house stands; and an old fashioned garden was laid out with flowers, shrubs and trees reminiscent of the exceptional botanical skill of old Jacobus Dyckman. (See The Dyckman House, Park and Museum, pub. by The Gilliss Press, 1916; and The 22d. Ann. Report, above cited, pp. 463-64.)

Through the researches of Mr. Reginald Pelham Bolton and his associates, a British camp site was discovered west of the Dyckman house,

where possibly several hundred cabins had been built under the shelter of the hillside. The relics of a cantonment were unearthed. A facsimile of one of these military huts has been constructed behind the house under Mr. Bolton's direction. (Ibid., p. 466, with reproduction from photograph on Plate 12.)

After the Revolution, the British camps were swept away, the huts were filled in, or burned, and the remaining timber carried away to be used in repairing ruined farmhouses, outbuildings and fences. Possibly some of those materials went into the building of this house.

A detailed account of the alterations and additions made, and the appearance of the house as restored in 1916 and since then preserved, was published as follows in the 22d Ann. Report (1917), already cited, pp. 475-82:

"The house itself has basement, parlor floor, bedroom floor and attic. It is well built. Its stone walls are twenty inches thick, and are continued up to the window ledges of the sleeping-room floor; above them heavy, hand-hewn white oak beams covered with wide clapboards fill in the space to the peak of the gambrel roof, which, incidentally, has an exceptionally graceful curve.

"The house had two extensions. The one to the south contained the summer kitchen and will later be described. The one to the north was relatively new, dating about 1830, built to provide additional room for the servants. This has now been removed.

"There are two rare features in the construction of the old house. It had a front of brick instead of field-stone, and it had also a basement. The latter was a feature which possibly arose from the situation of the house, for it was built against a ledge of rock, which supports the entire rear wall, and permitted, therefore, an unusual depth below.



"In the basement was a winter kitchen, having a large brick fireplace; beside this room, at the north, was a roomy and dry cellar, which no doubt was well provisioned in its days with winter vegetables and pans of milk resting on swinging shelves, the supports of which are still preserved. Into this cellar one might enter from without, from an inclined passageway, down a couple of steps and through sloping cellar doors, in the ancient Dutch fashion.

"The parlor floor is margined east and west by wide porches continued the full length of the house. It has the usual broad hall extending through the middle of the house from front to back, opening right and left into the main rooms. Here stands a tall Dutch clock. On the right as we enter the front door one looks into the parlor, at the left into the dining-room, which was just above the winter kitchen. In front is the narrow staircase, margined primly with a straight cherry rail, and below the turn of the stairs one sees through the opened half-door the trees on the slope of Inwood Ridge. Behind the parlor and also opening into the hall was a smaller room, known as Isaac Dyckman's room, and across the hall, opening by a doorway under the staircase, one could descend to the winter kitchen, or could enter through a small, dark passageway up and down three steps into a small back room, and thence into the rear of the dining-room. This room was known as Grandfather Dyckman's, and here, we believe, died William Dyckman in 1787.

"The sleeping-room floor includes five rooms. Of two small bedrooms at the rear only one opens into the hall--this is called Isaac Michael Dyckman's room. The two main rooms north and south are known, respectively, as the uncles' room and Jacobus Dyckman's room; into the latter opened the second rear room, which is believed to have been occupied by the youngest children. The front of the hall was enclosed as a dark,



The Dyckman House

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servant's or nurse's bedroom, from which passed curious low storage spaces, 'like secret passageways,' north and south, formed by the overhanging eaves and lighted by small bull's eyes at either end of the house. A stepladder leads to the garret, in which one may see the hand-hewn timber of the old house reaching upward to the gable and roofing a space which was invaluable in the domestic economy of olden times.... This great space was again lighted by bull's-eye at either end of the house.

"The southern addition contains a summer kitchen and above it was a large servants' room. This addition, we believe, was really of earlier date than the house itself, having probably been built prior to the American Revolution. For we know that the main building was erected in or about 1783, the year when William Dyckman returned to his home after the evacuation of the city by the British. His old house had been burned and he probably lived in the present addition, which served earlier as a foreman's cottage, or was possibly part of his first house, from 210th Street. This is evidenced by the character of the ceiling of its main room, which shows open rafters with beaded edges, also an early type of fireplace. Another reason for its greater age is that its north wall is covered with clapboards, although it faced the stone wall of the main house, thus showing conclusively that the stone wall must either have been built against the clapboards or that the small addition must subsequently have been moved up against the house.

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"Of bake ovens, we have two excellent specimens in the summer kitchen, so large that they appear on the outside of the house, projecting behind the chimney like buttresses, and indicating the size of the farm and the number of its slaves and helpers to be provided for.

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"The moulding or chair-rail, about the wall, shows that chairs were often placed close to the plaster, which was thus prudently guarded against injury. The mantels, which, by the way, are the original ones, save in the dining-room, are tall, narrow and formal, simple in ornament.

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"The little window-panes speak of the time when glass was more easily had in small 'lights'--when panes were green, uneven and bubbly, rusting in the air from poor chemical composition. But while glass was rare, iron was conspicuous, as one infers from the door hinges and their massive construction, for parts of the hinges ran strap-like over the woodwork before carpenters learned to hide the metal within the crease of the door. Double doors are characteristic of Dutch houses, with their curious hinges and latches which enabled the housewife to keep doors open but at the same time keep out of her halls the tracking feet of domestic animals--and children. On our front door is the knocker from a Dyckman house (Boscobel), which probably all older members of the family have used from 1795." (22d Ann. Report, supra, pp. 475-482.)

Of the very few houses still standing in New York which were built before 1800, the Dyckman house is the quaintest. Its proportions are unpretentious, for it was a simple farmhouse; but the two Dyckman daughters, who presented it to the city, have spared no trouble or expense in outfitting it with family heirlooms, and ^{with} Revolutionary trophies found by Mr. Bolton and his associates in the neighborhood, and in making the house as homelike and intimate as a public museum can hope to be.

Written, May 13, 1934, by

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

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Approved: *Mrs. Percy Foster*

Received 1936, H.C.F.

